

two letters from asia

edited by arwulf arwulf

Our first letter is dated Nov. 3rd, 1983. I've never met the person who wrote it. He is a friend of my friend, Tom Harary. The letter was written in response to the gift of a Rahsaan Roland Kirk cassette tape which I assembled and Tom sent off to India. Recently, when I asked Tom for the name of this individual, he smiled and said Krishna. When

I put together a sampler of what were at that time my favorite Roland Kirk recordings, I never dreamt I was sending vibes directly to someone who'd actually hung out with the legendary multi-instrumentalist. While Krishna might have been mistaken about Rahsaan's love life, most everything else herein bears the mark of Truth.

Now a report on the Roland Kirk tape, and a gasp of gratitude to your friend who made it. It was such a magic message, especially the "Bright Moments": "Now we know that nobody really dies; they just leave here." And we know that Rahsaan Roland Kirk is looking down at us right now..." All the more profound for me because of my intimate relationship with the man. After I left the U.S. in 1969 I never knew what became of him until I heard he had died. I had spent several years trying to get him decently recorded and booked. To me he was Orpheus, the very soul of music, incomparable energy of joy and happiness, something quite beyond. Roland was the cartoon Mr. Bop come alive and without self-consciousness of it. He wore a beret because he got it in Europe and it kept his head warm. He wore a jumpsuit long before the Merry Pranksters, to keep his reeds and clippers and clackers and whistles and other junk in. He rolled his tenor sax case on roller skate wheels down Broadway and 46th Street stopping at every music store and playing every horn in the shop. He could blow three saxophones at the same time, fingering in harmony, breathing through his nose, blowing without pause.

version by Jon Hendricks

Once I finally got a contract offer to record him for Atlantic IF I could get him into a studio for the session. But he refused. "Look, man, I play for live folks, havin' a good time. I can't think in an empty box." "But Roland!" I protested, "what difference does it make..." I caught myself before saying "...to you...you're Blind!" "Anyway," he said, "I gotta hear what folks are listenin' to before I know what to lay on 'em next." Around Christmas in 1967 he called me almost in tears: "Hey, man, what's wrong with me? Every kid with a guitar book has got an album and a job. This is the first New Year's Eve I ain't had a gig since I was fourteen." I got Dick Gregory to throw a benefit party in Chicago, and booked Roland. He never knew it was a benefit; Gregory paid him and his group for the concert.

You gotta get the picture of this bopper with black glasses and beret wheeling his sax case down 46th Street, honking his squeeze horn mounted on top, ringing a bicycle bell and bein' led into Hoffman's Cafeteria and the Automat by this little hunchbacked kid with long hair who was on a 30 day fast, going down the cafeteria line describing the food: "What kind of potatoes they got?" "French fries, mashed, creamed, parsley boiled..." "Yeah, okay." "Okay what?" "Okay everything! They got any hash browns?" "I don't see any." "Ask." "Do you have any..." "We can make you up some, Roland." "Groovy. Gravy too." Jello and chocolate pudding, apple, cherry and lemon meringue pie, three trays full. All I had to do was push the plates

Friends and family: sorry to address you in bulk, but i love all of you and do not have the appropriate time to write individually. i leave tomorrow from hong kong and head to kathmandu, nepal. i said goodbye to china as soon as i got to hong kong. this place hasn't been china for a long, long time. china is a wonderful country. i have never been in a safer place in my entire life. i found myself lost (many times in fact) in the middle of the night, walking through tight alleys, stepping in puddles of pee, without any clue as to where i was, or where i was going. lost in places that i would not want to be found in the usa. i was never afraid. people here don't think like that. there doesn't seem to be an inclination towards crime. the air is dirty. the ground is dirty. the bathrooms are dirty. you get used to it. the people are beautiful. they are helpful. smiling. curious. are they happy? i wish i knew. it's the one question that i can't find an answer to. i've seen lots of poor people. but i've seen lots of poor people—working. they all lead sustainable lives. not too many starving. not rich like us, but not destitute like us either. what is disappointing is the fact that i can see the faint (but ever darkening) lines of class separation here. china's slowly opening market is taking affect. from time to time a lexus rolls by an old woman biking seaweed to the market, and unlike twenty years ago, the driver is not a party official. i cannot explain how different it feels here. even more so since i cannot imagine what life is like at home amidst falling buildings. i saw the attack live on tv. it happened at 8:45 at night here. the only english channel we had was cnn. everybody was watching casually as we prepared to enjoy xian by night. needless to say, we stayed home. i know these attacks have changed my lifetime. they have already changed the plans of this trip. india is being rescheduled. they may

note: Snakes are a time-honored symbol of Change. Serpents shed their skins and go ahead on. The circumstances which led this young man to undergo a snake bite initiation in China must have

occurred in order to provide him with access to an awareness of Change in its many masks. May our Nik live a long and Changeful life, ready for every variation in the wrinkles of the cortex of the earth. We would like to thank the Moon and Snake Mother for having made portions of this column possible.

in front of him and tell him what was on them. Funny thing. I never got hungry watching. And no one paid any attention. That's Broadway. So back to this tape you sent me. Well, after waiting for a full moon, I finally took the trip on a dark and cloudy night. I turned off all the lights, put the headphones on and let Roland roll. I laughed until tears flowed. You gotta know when you hear that wood block xylophone sound, it's him hitting himself on the head with a drum stick and making the tune by changing the O in his mouth. Then you gotta see the fantastic energy it takes to blow a Peruvian Panpipe with your nose and bang a bass drum at the same time. When he says "If you wanna know how it is to be free, you got to spend all day in bed with me" it's the crazy wisdom of a man who was married to one good woman all his life and never played around. When I hear him singing "Make Me a Pallet on the Floor" I remember how once we were talking about dying and Roland said "When I go, I hope all my friends get together, cut me up, put me in a big bag of pot and smoke me."

Finally the tape was over. I opened my eyes and the moon had come out. I went out in the garden and sat down on the bench. The entire sky was overcast except for a single hole with the moon bright as an eye in the socket. Now the meditation on the moon is something I've tried almost every month since 1968 and it's almost impossible. First you've got to get the moon, and a place you can see it from, and then the rest of the world to let you try, and then your own body and mind determined to do it. Then the eyes either water or bifurcate (making two moons) or double focus (making a moon and a halo) or burn out or blink or jump or...well, that's the game. It's like playing handball against the wall, you never win, but it's the only game for a kid all alone, and you keep score against yourself. Suddenly there it was: a moment when the moon was clear and whole and the eyes were steady and straight and it was so perfect, so easy, it was no game at all. And somehow I knew I was looking Roland right in the eye, just for a moment. Then the clouds closed and it rained for the rest of the night. Give this to your radio friend and recommend that he dig Louis Armstrong singing "Azalea," Julie Andrews (?) and Johnny Cash singing "Love Me Tender," and an English group called Duet Emmo doing "The First Person." Also try to get another English group called "The Kids of Fame." Hey man, can you send a Beginners Guitar How To Play Easy Chord Book for Sarath. "House of the Rising Sun," "Mr. Tambourine Man," etc.

PEACE ALL WAYS, YOUR FRIEND.

Wow. I've been wanting to share that epistle with the public for many many years. Hope you enjoyed it. [PS: Louis Armstrong recorded "Azalea" with Duke Ellington in 1962.]

Our next letter is dated Oct. 5th, 2001. It came to me very recently through Dr. George Klein, a professor at Eastern Michigan University and host of the Grooveyard, a really solid retrospective dose of Early Modern Jazz which airs Sundays from 1 to 3 PM (right after my show) on WEMU 89.1 FM. George oversees an overseas travel study program whereby students tour Europe, Asia and other parts of the World. Obviously, given the current onset of World War Three, George and anyone who knows anybody in

the program has had to deal with an awful lot of stress. Should they cancel the rest of the tour? Just when George was feeling maxed out with the pressure of it all, an e-mail appeared written by a participant in the program who is also another WEMU music show host: late night jammer Nikolas Thompson. He was writing from China, en route to India, one of thirty young Americans at large in a world gone mad. Anybody who knows Nik will agree with me when I tell you he's one of the sweetest, most creative and ethically aware people alive today. put his words down here for public perusal with love and respect for him and for you. Safe passage, Nik, and harm to none.

send us home early. they better not. (mother don't worry. i'm safer here than at home.)

i miss china already. the people here take pictures of me. they touch, and giggle at, my tattoo. they ride bicycles, everywhere. and small motorcycles. beer is less than fifty cents. for a big ass bottle. i can eat lunch for a quarter. people smile a lot. even if they are barefoot. the mountains are different than anything i've ever seen. the tap water is brown. my freshly washed clothes smell like fish. i eat tofu at every meal. the planes here stay away from buildings. i got bit by a snake, six times. not kidding. six times. once on the nose. really. i was at a restaurant where they served live snake. my buddies ordered one. i was playing with it and thanking it for dying for my tourist friends' appetites, and the little bastard bit me, six times. big fangs, too. really big when they're like one inch from your face. the restaurant erupted in panic. my nose bled everywhere. so when they cut the snake's head off and mixed it with rice wine, i had to drink some. he drank me...

i've been taking larium (an anti-malaria drug). i can't begin to tell you the dreams i've been having. i'm almost to the point where i would prefer to have malaria. i'll put it this way: when i get up in the morning the first thing i do is check to make sure i only have two eyes, and make damn sure i don't have a tail. not only weird dreams, but vivid and real. very real, scary real. makes up for the lack of chinese street drugs, i guess. new dylan record is wonderful. old mingus shines brightly under the chinese coal burning haze. only have 15 cds to choose from. miss every song i can't hear. love what i'm doing. but miss you all dearly. tell president retard not to kill anybody till i get through india. strike that. tell him not to kill anybody ever. and to learn a few new "hard" words. see you soon, have a good autumn.

love from china, nikolas